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Samuel A. Ro

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WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF MAY 20?

That elegant production, the Declaration of Independence of May 31st, is conceded to be the work of Dr. Ephraim Brevard. Dr. Brevard had no precedent to guide him. His was the first paper of its kind. In it he declared that the authority of the mother country had ceased, and that the only power of government that existed was vested in the Provincial and Continental Congresses. Until Congress should provide other laws, he proposed a local government for the conty, founded on election by the people.

Here was separation, independence, popular soverignty. Such was the Declaration of May 31st, written by the patriot Brevard.

It is a question of historic interest who was the author of that other document that has long been known as the Declaration of Independence of May 20th. At present, his identi-ty is unknown.

The original record of the meeting held in May, 1775, at Charlotte, which was in the keeping of Col. John McKnitt Alexander, was destroyed when his residence was burned in April, 1800, and as a manuscript account of the proceedings was found after his death in 1817 among his old papers, one would naturally infer that he was the author. But the internal evidence is against that conclusion. Apparently, Colonel Alexander did not compose with has been called "The Declaration." He wrote the notes on which the narrative and "the Declaration" were based, but another hand and brain did the final work.* He laid the foundation, but some one else

Foot Note.—A fac-simile of a manuscript copy of Colonel Alexander's notes will be found in Hoyt's "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence," Putnam:—a work remarkable for its fullness, accuracy, research, and candor.

erected the superstructure. While we do not know who this person was, it is clear that he was not one of the old pariots who participated in the proceedings of May, 1775. He knew nothing of the details of those proceedings. Colonel Alexander in his notes made some errors and omissions, all of which remain without amendment in the finished paper. The error that the election was called by Col. Adam Alexander instead of Colonel Polk appears in both; the omission of Dr. Brevard as Secretary, and the omission of the great meeting, and of Colonel Polk's proclaiming independence, occur in both. The unknown writer certainly knew nothing of the proceedings, and did not aid the defective memory of Col. Alexander. But he was conversant with Jefferson's Fourth of July Declaration; and he was a man of ideas, fond of expressions and trained as a builder of sentences. Other than this, we only knew that Dr. Joseph Alexander did not recognize his handwriting. While the notes were written by his father, and his father corrected the finished account, yet Dr. Alexander tells us that the latter was in "an unknown handwrite." When found in 1817, the two papers were sewed together.

Colonel Alexander's statement of facts is embraced in the notes. He wrote:

"On the 19th of May, 1775, pursuant to the order of Colonel Adam Alexander to each captain of militia in his regiment of Mecklenburg County to elect, nominate, and appoint two persons of their militia company, clothed with ample powers, to devise ways and means to extricate themselves and ward off the dreadful impending storm then bursting on them by the British nation, etc., etc.

"Therefore on said 19th of May the said Committee met in Charlotte town, two men from each company, vested with all powers these their constituents had, or conceived they had, etc.

"After a short conference about their suffering brethren, beseiged

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and suffering every hardship in Boston, and the American blood running at Lexington, etc., the electric fire flew into every breast; and to preserve order, chose Abraham Alex, Esquire, Chairman, and J. McK. A., Secretary."

It will be observed that Colonel Alexander was himself a fair writer of English.

But let us see how the unknown author expands in swelling volume the above plain statement: He writes:

"In the spring of 1775, the leading characters of Mecklenburg County, stimulated by that enthusiastic patriotism which elevates the mind above considerations of individual agrandizement, and scorning to shelter themselves from the impending storm by submission to lawless power, etc., etc., held several detached meetings, in each of which the individual sentiments were, etc., etc., etc., etc.

"Conformably to these principles, Col. Adam Alexander, through solicitation, issued an order to each captain's company in the county of Mecklenburg (then comprising the present county of Cabarrus), directing each militia company to elect two persons and delegate to them ample powers to devise ways and means to aid and assist their suffering brethren in Boston, and also generally to adopt measures to extricate members from the impending storm, and to secure unimpaired their inalienable rights, privileges, and liberties from the dominant grasp of British imposition and tyranny.

"In conformity to said order, on the 19th of May, 1775, the said delegation met in Charlotte (town) vested with unlimited powers; at which time official news, by express, arrived of the battle of Lexington on that day of the preceding month. Every delegate felt the value and importance of the prize, and the awful and solem crisis which had arrived,—every bosom swelled with indignation at the malice, inveteracy, and insatiable revenge, developed in the late attack at Lexington. The universal sentiment was: let us not flatter ourselves that popular harangues, or resolves; that popular vapour, will avert the storm, or vanquish our common enemy—let us deliberate—let us calculate the issue—the probable result—and then let us act with energy, as brethren leagued to preserve our property—our lives—and what is still more endearing, the liberties of America. Abraham Alexander was then elected Chairman, and John McKnott Alexander, Clerk."

One risks but little in saying that Colonel Alexander, sensible, and clear in his ideas, must have yielded with some reluctance to the incorporation of much of the above into his narrative.

Returning to the notes: Colonel Alexander, after the organization of the meeting, continued:

"After about an hour," but on second thought, he wrote: "After a few hours free discussion, in order to give relief to suffering America and protect our just and natural rights—

"(1) We (the county) by a solemn and awful vote, dissolved(abjured) our allegiance to King George and the British nation.

"(2) Declared ourselves a free and independent people, having a right and capable to govern ourselves as a part of North Carolina.

"(3) In order to have laws as a rule of life—for our future government we formed a code of laws by adopting our former wholesome laws.

"(4) And as there were then no officers, civil or military, in our county, we decreed that every militia officer in said county, should hold and occupy his former commission and grade; and that every member present of this Committee shall henceforth —— as a justice of the peace in the character of a committee m(an) —— hear and determine all controversies agreeably to said laws, etc., etc.

"(5) Many other laws and ordinances were then m(ade), after sitting

up in the court-house all night, neither (sleepy, hungry, or fatigued). After reading and maturing every paragraph, they were all passed nemcon, about 12 o'clock, May 20, 1775."

Alexander had a very fair recollection of the burnt document,—if that document was the Brevard Declaration of May 31st, as the present writer believes.

Comparing his statement with the Brevard Declaration, we see that the subject of annulling the government of the mother country is confined to the first resolution in each; and that the subject of affirming popular government is confined to the second resolution in each. While the language is different, the general idea and scope of the resolutions are entirely the same.

Similarly, the third resolution, in each, relate specifically to the same subject:—to form a code of laws to replace those abolished.

The fourth and fifth resolutions of the Brevard Declaration relate, respectively, to new military and civil officers. Colonel Alexander followed the same order, a paragraph to the military officers; and one to the civil officers; but united them under one heading. These subjects being disposed of, he covers the fifteen additional resolution, by this: Fifth, etc., etc. Many other laws and ordinances were then made.

In these notes he expressed substantially the respective subjects of the several resolutions—but not the language, which he probably could not recall with confidence. He recalled perfectly the order in which the several dieffrent subjects came, and this conclusively shows that he had fixed in his memory the Brevard Declaration.

The unknown writer maintains the same order, but he inserts a preliminary resolution, not found in the notes, nor in the Brevard Declaration. He begins:

"After a free and full discussion of his various objects for which the delegation had been convened, it was unanimously ordained*—

Foot Note.—While Colonel Alexander always wrote of 't'he committee and committeemen," the author changes it to "delegation" and "delegate"; and so, the delegation "ordained."

"(1) That whoever directly or indirectly abetted, or in any way, form or manner, countenanced the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights, as claimed by G. Britain, is an enemy to this country—to America and to the inherent and inaliable rights of man.

"(2) We, the citizens of Mecklenburg County (are hereby absolved from), do hereby disolve the political bands which have connected us to the Mother Country, and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British Crown, and abjure all political connection, contract or (dependence) association with that nation, who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties—and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.

"(3) We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self-governing association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the general government of the Congress to the maintenance of which independence, civil and religious, we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred power."

[The four and five resolves were too similar to the third and fourth of the notes, although somewhat enlarged, to need repetition.]

In 1775 Dr. Brevard had no form to guide him; in 1800 the unknown scribe had some acquaintance with Jefferson's Declaration. He inserted some phrases that were not current in May, 1775, but afterwards became common. These expressions were apparently not in Col. Alexander's mind when he prepared his notes, and it is not at all likely

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that he introduced them into the finished narrative. In his notes he mentioned "our just and natural right." The unknown scribe broadens it into "inherent and inaliable rights of man." At first he wrote: "We, the citizens of Mecklenburg County are hereby absolved from political bonds which have connected us"—but he altered it to: "do hereby dissolve, etc.," "and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegience, etc." We * * are and of right ought to be a sovereign and self-governing association." ——"to the maintenance of which independence, civil and religious, we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes and our most sacred honor."

These expressions were not coined in May, 1775, and were not in the notes, and their use may be attributed to the unknown scribe of 1800. We have seen how far he excelled the good old Colonel in descriptive writing; his force, his vigor, his flaming imagination, his familiarity with expressions, and his adept use of allitteratives, "scorning to shelter themselves from the impending storm by submission to lawless power;" and we are surely within reason in attributing to him these fine expressions which are also found in Jefferson's Declaration.

But who was this unknown scribe; who was the word-builder of that famous piece of composition? In 1800 was there any school master living in that vicinity who could have entered with genuine ardor on this labor of love, the restoration of a Memorial of Mecklenburg's patriotism? If so, his name should be rescued from oblivion.

The subsequent history of this document is that Colonel Alexander sent a copy of it to General Davie, to which he carefully appended a formal certificate that as it was written from memory it might not literally correspond with the burned record; and except that copy it is not known that he ever allowed another copy to pass out of his possession. After his death his son made a copy for Congressman Davidson, which was printed in the Raleigh Register in February, 1819. That was corrected and added to by Colonel Polk and Judge Murphey in 1821.

Colonel Polk added:

> "Resolved, That the foregoing resolutions be adopted which was accordingly done unanimously, and that the Delegates sign their names to the same.
>
> "It was also resolved that a copy should be transmitted by express to the General Congress to be laid before that body, etc., etc."

Judge Martin incorporated into his History of North Carolina (1829) the document as prepared by Polk and Martin, but altered it to suit himself, here and there. His last resolution was:

> "Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be transmitted by express to the President of the Continental Congress, assembled in Philadelphia, to be laid before that body."

He added: These resolutions were unanimously adopted and subscribed by the Delegates.

The idea of sending a copy to Congress was an after-thought; but Judge Martin, mislead by Colonel Polk, made it the sixth resolution.

Once it was thought that Judge Martin's document was a copy taken from the record prior to the fire, and from that it was inferred that there was such an original record made in May, 1775. But it is now clear that Judge Martin used the Polk and Murphey document of 1821, and that the only record or copy in existence prior to 1800 was the Brevard Declaration of May 31, 1775.

Every reference to the Mecklenburg Declaration prior to 1800 must have been to the Brevard resolves, because no othes had then been written.

S. A. ASHE.

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